Miss Kennicott

There is the sea, vast and spacious…There the ships go to and fro – Psalm 104:25-26.

Just like people, a ship has a life of its own, twisting and turning throughout their long life span. Metaphorically, a ship lives and breathes, carrying her passengers and cargo safely from one port to another in challenging environments from fog-bound narrow channels to high, storm-tossed seas.

MV Kennicott in Seldovia, AK.

At first, the *Kennicott* was ridiculed in Southeastern Alaska, where waters were commonly smooth; calling her the Tin-can-o-cot, the Lemmon-cott, the Apri-cott, the Kennibox. Armchair sailors commenting that "her square stern looked like it had backed into a rock cliff," and another offering, "If only they had asked me, I could have told them how to build a good ship."

Her secrets rest not in her appearance or a square superstructure, but rather, in the refined lines of her hull, a hull made of strong steel, massive, heavy transverse web frames and longitudinal frames. Unseen by many, the *Kennicott* has a double hull below the surface. Tested in high technology wave tanks when it was designed, *Kennicott's* hull form is made to handle the expected range of sea conditions found in the Gulf of Alaska. Additionally, the *Kennicott* is equipped with Becker rudders, stabilizer fins with aileron flaps, and an omni-directional bow thruster.

By far, this is the best riding vessel I have ever experienced, steering like a Rolls Royce, and enjoying tremendous stability, her center of gravity changing little as passengers, vehicles, potable water, and fuel are brought onboard.

There is no stiffness to her sea-keeping ability.

MV Kennicott nearly filling in the channel northbound in Wrangell Narrows approaching Green Rocks Light #37

Her helm responds quickly to a rudder command, her Becker rudders outfitted with an additional moveable tail fin on the after edge of the rudders, giving her tremendous turning power and maneuverability with small rudder angles. This is especially important in narrow channels as Wrangell Narrows, or Sergius Narrows and Whitestone Narrows in Peril Strait.

This wonderful ship can travel in relative comfort where the others cannot attempt to make a passage. At first, Alaskans did not know the ship. In Southwest Alaska, where waters are much rougher, people were elated to see the *Kennicott* and knew a good ship when they were on one.

While on the Bellingham route down the coast of British Columbia, we never had to tack (zig-zag) our course in Queen Charlotte Sound or in Milbanke Sound due to rough seas. Instead, we held close to our charted track line, the most direct route, and stood astonished at *Kennicott*'s ease with rough water. Where others waited for the weather, we proceeded on. To be sure, there are weather delays when winds blew in excess of 60 knots from ahead in the Gulf of Alaska. We have waited in Icy Strait in Southeast Alaska, or in Prince William Sound in south-central Alaska for a strong weather front to pass overhead and move inland.

A strong ship is necessary. *Cyclogenesis* events can occur in the fall and winter, producing winds of hurricane force with little warning, especially near the Fairweather Grounds as storms press up against the high Fairweather

Range. Producing heavy freezing spray and violent seas, *Arctic outflow* blows out from the mouth of the Copper River, or through the Barren Islands, or the bays and passes of the Alaska Peninsula, where bitter cold wind rushes through the mountain gaps to the open sea attempting to fill the near continuous low-pressure weather systems in the Gulf of Alaska. At times, all one can do is run with the wind and find shelter in Prince William Sound if close enough, or Yakutat Roads and Monti Bay where the best harbor on the northern Gulf coast is found, or wait it out at Kodiak or Dutch Harbor.

Heading west across the Gulf of Alaska off the mouth of the Copper River

There were those still in doubt about the *Kennicott's* seaworthiness, but when the *Kennicott* was in a storm in the Gulf of Alaska a transformation of opinion occurred. Slowly, people began to learn about the capabilities of the *Kennicott*, a ship made to endure. Miss *Kennicott* is not a Southeast shuttle ferry, but an ocean-going racehorse doing what she is made to do.

For a captain, her unseen, intangible qualities make her a champion ocean-going traveler. Her soul is good, and those of us who served onboard her knew it. There is nothing quite like arriving at Cape Spencer, the northern outlet from the Inside Passage to the Gulf of Alaska, putting her combinator handles down, feeling her strength and power, setting a western course, and letting her run across the Gulf of Alaska.

Learning her little tricks, her feel, her touch, takes time and concentration. She has a rhythmic, deep rumble within, a strong, powerful ship, built heavy, so much so, that when she leaves a dock, passengers hardly feel or notice that the ship is underway. She is one-of-a-kind, sailing in a rough proving

A view of the Kennicott's powerful Becker rudders

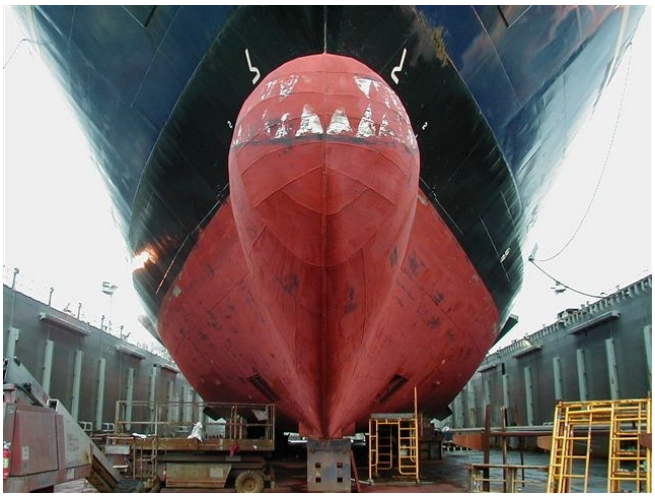
ground; her ride is smooth.

Her many systems, propulsion, steering, electrical, sanitation, ventilation, potable water, ballast, fuel, oil, cooling water, and crew, all had to mesh and work together as one, like a living organism. It is no easy matter, and as with any new ship, there were issues:

- Rupturing in the wheelhouse, the overhead sprinkler system dumped some 500 gallons of anti-freeze treated water into the wheelhouse due to interaction between dissimilar metals. The system's drain plugs were made of steel and threaded onto copper/nickel piping, and slowly corroding, blew out under pressure.
- Roller doors on the vehicle elevator system blew out of their tracks in high wind, bending curtain panels. The curtain tracks or guides were not deep enough to handle strong wind.
- EMI steering system needed adjustments for narrow channel navigation.
- Power take-off generator shaft bearings flew apart in the reduction gearbox nearly destroying the reduction gears. The PTO shaft was declared scrap metal and removed. A new shaft and bearings were installed later and the PTO generator re-aligned.
- We suffered random power failures due to improper tightening of circuit breakers in the main switchboard. Tightening of the circuit breakers was a two-step process and some had not had the second step done to complete the tightening.
- *Kennicott* was designed to have camber in her decks, "the slight

athwartships arch of the decks that allows for a quick drainage of water." Camber was deleted from the project to save money. The ship ended up with flat decks and drainage problems. Many of these problems were partially addressed by extending housetop eves to shed water father outboard.

There were days of challenges during her first years of service. Many of these problems were the temporary issues of a new ship. Once these problems reveal themselves and are cured by skillful marine engineers, they never appear again.



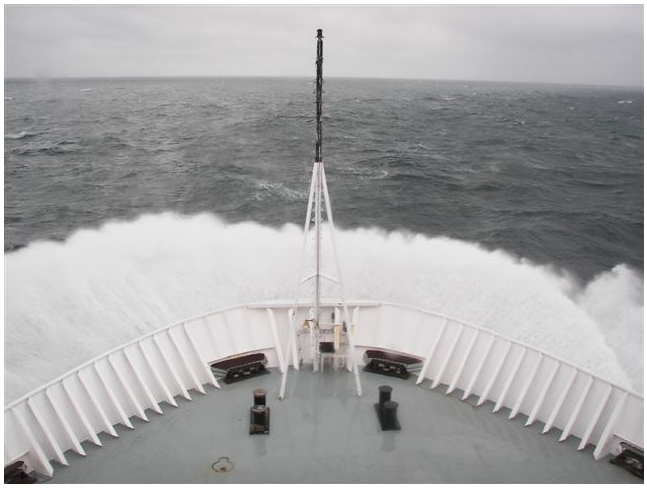
A view of the *MV Kennicott's* underwater hull in dry-dock at Alaska Ship and dry-dock in Ketchikan, AK.

Carrying a great name, M/V *Kennicott* is named after an Alaskan glacier, in turn named for an early American explorer of Alaska's interior, Robert Kennicott, of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition of 1865 - 1867, who conducted American explorations along the Yukon River while Alaska was in Russian hands. Because our ship carried the name of the ill-fated Alaska Steamship Company's S/S *Kennecott*, some said the M/V *Kennicott* would be jinxed, a superstitious belief, as though to say, "Beware."

S/S *Kennecott* ran aground and sank off the British Columbia coast in Queen Charlotte Islands on October 9, 1923. Her master, Captain John A. "Laughing Jack" Johnson, had suffered an earlier shipwreck onboard a ship named *Ohio*. Despondent over a second shipwreck in his career, Captain Johnson jumped overboard from the stern of the rescuing vessel, the tug *Algerine*, in Finlayson Channel, near the site of his first shipwreck. Johnson chose to disappear under the sea forever, rather than face the ignominy a Coast Guard inquiry in Seattle.[1] Stepping onboard

the modern *Kennicott*, we were reminded by others of this legacy, however, our modern *Kennicott* is a different ship in a different time, and is spelled with an “I’ and not an “E”. Our motor vessel *Kennicott* is, strong, powerful, and successful.

The semi-circular arc that describes the coast of the Gulf of Alaska is the area of *Kennicott*’s operations, from Bellingham to Kodiak and sometimes to all the way out to Dutch Harbor. Views from her decks on clear-weather days are spectacular, the Inside Passage, the Coast Range, the Fairweather Range, the St. Elias Mountains, the Chugach Mountains, the Kenai Mountains, Kodiak Island, and lately, the Alaska Peninsula and the eastern Aleutians.



Heading east into a southeasterly wind and sea in the Gulf of Alaska

In the summer, feeding whales, as though in a cetacean playground, slap the water with their tail flukes, or lying on their sides slapping the water with their long pectoral fins making large splashes. Blowhole sprays shooting upward like geysers, or bubble feeding, give a whale’s position away. Shimmering arched backs are seen, black and glistening in the sunlight as whales dive into the depths, their submerging tails barely leaving a mark on the surface of the water.

In the fall, when traveling west into the setting sun, we gather in the wheelhouse with our binoculars focused on the horizon to capture the moment the upper limb of the sun dips below the sharp horizon followed with the eruption of a green flash of the most mesmerizing emerald green one can ever see.

In the winter, blasts of solar wind lighting up the earth’s magnetic field in a

magnetic storm of *Aurora Borealis*. Nature's neon lighting is awash in color with undulating, shimmering curtains of blushing brightness in crimson magenta, or fanning yellow-green as spokes of a wheel revolving around a darker point of night sky, at times, reflecting on the surface of the sea.

In the spring, our world turns green with suddenness, a rich verdure covering the lower elevations. We watch for bears feeding on grass, and approve of the increasing daylight hours.

Sailing the fine vessels of the Alaska Marine Highway System has been a profound pleasure. Miss *Kennicott*, you are a splendid ship with a great crew. Your unseen and under-appreciated qualities are appreciated by me – a double hull, Becker rudders, a steering system that allows us to handle you like a Rolls Royce, with tremendous transverse stability, stabilizer fins that really dampen the sea's motion, engines that perform, a magnificent, spacious bridge, and a powerful omni-directional bow thruster. You have brought us through horrific storms and seas in perfect safety and relative comfort. We are privileged to see Alaska's coastal grandeur in intimate detail from your decks.

Sailing on the *Kennicott* has been a pleasure and a profound experience beyond measure.

Written and Photographs Provided by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired

---

[1] McDonald, Lucile, *Alaska Steam – A Pictorial History of the Alaska Steamship Company*, Alaska Geographic, Volume 11, Number 4, 1984, pp. 70 – 73.